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Virtual Saviours: Digital games and anti-trafficking awareness-raising

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Abstract

In recent years, digital games have emerged as a new tool in human trafficking awareness-raising. These games reflect a trend towards 'virtual humanitarianism', utilising digital technologies to convey narratives of suffering with the aim of raising awareness about humanitarian issues. The creation of these games raises questions about whether new technologies will depict humanitarian problems in new ways, or simply perpetuate problematic stereotypes. This article examines three online games released in the last five years for the purpose of raising awareness about human trafficking. In analysing these games, we argue that the persistent tropes of ideal victims lacking in agency continue to dominate the narrative, with a focus on individualised problems rather than structural causes of human trafficking. However, the differing approaches taken by the games demonstrate the potential for complexity and nuance in storytelling through digital games.

Keywords: human trafficking, games, advocacy, awareness-raising, virtual, narrative

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Introduction

Anti-trafficking awareness-raising has long relied on stereotypes of victims, villains and heroes to raise awareness and generate public action.¹ In recent years, such efforts have expanded from solely print or filmic formats to include digital games. This article explores three distinct digital games for anti-trafficking awareness-raising released in the last five years: the *BAN Human Trafficking* game by Balkans ACT (Against Crime of Trafficking) Now!, released for desktop and smartphone in 2014, in which players can choose to play as one of six protagonists, representing different experiences of human trafficking in Europe; the desktop game (*Un*) *Trafficked*, released in 2017 and promoted by the foundation of Indian Nobel Peace Prize recipient Kailash Satyarthi, in which players take on the role of a thirteen-year-old girl; and *Missing: Game for a Cause* (referred to as *Missing* in this paper), released in 2016 and developed by anti-trafficking activist Leena Kejriwal, in which players act as 'Champa', a girl held prisoner in a brothel where she must 'service' clients and attempt to escape.

Games about human trafficking are just one example of the trend towards what we term 'virtual humanitarianism'—the use of digital technologies to demonstrate, or depict, the suffering of others for the purpose of raising awareness about humanitarian issues. Virtual humanitarianism includes the development of games designed to bring attention to political issues such as those explored in this paper, as well as the use of virtual reality or simulation platforms such as the problematic virtual reality tour of Puerto Rico following Hurricane Maria, hosted by Mark Zuckerberg via Facebook.²

Our use of the term 'virtual humanitarianism' is distinct from the field which has been termed 'digital humanitarianism'—the increasing use by humanitarian and aid organisations of digital technologies and practices to try to improve provision of aid and responses to disasters. This can include digital mapping of disaster zones such as in Typhoon Haiyan; use of biometrics by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) to facilitate tracking and support of refugees on the move; algorithmic monitoring of social media following a disaster; or use of remote technologies

¹ E O'Brien, *Challenging the Human Trafficking Narrative: Victims, villains and heroes*, Routledge, London, 2019, p. 57; R Andrijasevic and N Mai, 'Editorial: Trafficking (in) Representations: Understanding the recurring appeal of victimhood and slavery in neoliberal times', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 7, 2016, pp. 1-10, <https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.20121771>.

² C McGoogan, 'Zuckerberg apologises for "tasteless" Puerto Rico VR video', *The Telegraph*, 11 October 2017, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/2017/10/10/mark-zuckerberg-criticised-tasteless-puerto-rico-vr-video>. See also: V Kaussen, 'Zooming In: Virtual disaster tourism in post-earthquake Haiti', *Social and Economic Studies*, vol. 64, no. 3/4, 2015, pp. 33-78.

including drones in the provision of aid.³ Such approaches have been critiqued for re-inscribing capitalist models of aid and development, the distancing of suffering, and the subjugation of local and subaltern voices and expertise.⁴ Our analysis of the advocacy and awareness-raising games explored in this paper draws on related critiques, but our focus here is more specific and distinct than this broader discussion as we are focused not on the use of digital technologies to assist or ‘improve’ service delivery of humanitarian aid, but rather more public-audience facing efforts to raise awareness about various forms of violence and suffering.

New technologies to communicate suffering and raise awareness can be termed ‘humanitarian communication’ that ‘distanc[es] the spectator from the spectacle of the sufferers through [a framing device] while enabling proximity between the two through narrative and visual resources that invite our empathetic judgement toward the spectacle’.⁵ In traditional forms of awareness-raising such as poster and ad campaigns, social media campaigns, and documentary storytelling (including what Sharapov and Mendel have termed ‘docufictions’⁶), the audience observes the story.

For the audience of these messages, any action on their part comes as a consequence of observing messages and thus being catalysed to act by, for example, signing petitions, donating money, sharing content, or lobbying decision-makers. Some of this activity has been called ‘commodity activism’.⁷ For example Brough *et al.* describe it as ‘the branding and consumption of humanitarian projects—and the

³ See, illustratively: M Duffield, ‘The Resilience of the Ruins: Towards a critique of digital humanitarianism’, *Resilience*, vol. 4, issue 3, 2016, pp. 147-165, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21693293.2016.1153772>; K L Jacobsen, *The Politics of Humanitarian Technology: Good intentions, unintended consequences and insecurity*, Routledge, London, 2015; R Burns, ‘Moments of Closure in the Knowledge Politics of Digital Humanitarianism’, *Geoforum*, vol. 53, 2014, pp. 51-62, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2014.02.002>; L Shanley, R Burns, Z Bastian and E Robson, ‘Tweeting up a Storm: The promise and perils of crisis mapping’, *Photogrammetric Engineering & Remote Sensing*, vol. 79, 2013, pp. 865–879, <https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2464599>.

⁴ For example: Duffield; Burns.

⁵ B Irom, ‘Virtual Reality and the Syrian Refugee Camps: Humanitarian communication and the politics of empathy’, *International Journal of Communication*, vol. 12, 2018, p. 4269. See also: L Chouliaraki, *The Ironic Spectator: Solidarity in the age of post-humanitarianism*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2013.

⁶ K Sharapov and J Mendel, ‘Trafficking in Human Beings: Made and cut to measure? Anti-trafficking docufictions and the production of anti-trafficking truths’, *Cultural Sociology*, vol. 12, issue 4, 2018, pp. 540-560, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975518788657>.

⁷ S Cottle and D Nolan, ‘Global Humanitarianism and the Changing Aid–Media Field: “Everyone was dying for footage”’, *Journalism Studies*, vol. 8, issue 6, 2007, pp. 862-78, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616700701556104>.

humanitarian identity—as products’.⁸ Extending on these forms of activism, virtual humanitarianism situates the audience within the artefact itself. The audience moves within the virtual environment, notionally ‘experiencing’ the problem and playing some role in directing the outcome of the story. Like other forms of awareness-raising, the audience of these games are also assumed to be motivated to take action outside of the simulation, although Waldorf notes the translation of online activism to ‘offline, sustained participation’ continues to be difficult.⁹ As a form of narrative politics, these simulations allow the audience to engage in a more active process of ‘anomalous replotting’,¹⁰ in which the audience is encouraged to imagine how the story could have been changed if things had been done differently. Even in traditional forms of awareness-raising, the audience is always able to engage their mind in anomalous replotting, but through forms of virtual humanitarianism they become participants¹¹ in guiding the plot.

In this article we focus on the narratives and storytelling devices used in the three examined games. This exploration allows a close examination of the ways in which digital games, as an emerging aspect of anti-trafficking awareness-raising, reflect or challenge existing stereotypes in public discourses on human trafficking; and a consideration of what the medium of digital games offers advocates for humanitarian causes. Through this analysis, we argue that while digital games may offer opportunities for extending the impact of anti-trafficking awareness-raising, the games examined here demonstrate that, just like other coverage of the issue of human trafficking, digital games can also reinforce damaging stereotypes and perpetuate limited stories about victims, perpetrators and saviours.

Games as Awareness-Raising Tools

Digital games—whether played on a console or on the phone in your pocket—have been hailed as a new form of technology, a new way to tell stories, often as something *more* than other mediums like print or film. Digital games that explore political events and other issues—whether real or fictionalised—have proliferated in recent years. These include games like *Papers, Please*, in which players act as

⁸ M Brough, “Fair Vanity” in R Mukherjee and S Banet-Weiser (eds.), *Commodity Activism: Cultural resistance in neoliberal times*, New York University Press, New York, 2012, p. 178.

⁹ L Waldorf, ‘White Noise: Hearing the disaster’, *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, vol. 4, issue 3, 2012, pp. 469–474, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jhuman/hus025>.

¹⁰ R Gerrig, *Experiencing Narrative Worlds: On the psychological activities of reading*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1993, p. 177.

¹¹ B Keogh, *A Play of Bodies: How we perceive videogames*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2018, p. 182.

border guards of a fictional communist country;¹² the ‘newsgame’ *September 12*, released after 9/11, in which players have to identify civilians or terrorists in split-second choices;¹³ or *Unmanned*, in which players take on the role of a bored drone operator.¹⁴ These and other similar games present new challenges for considering the role of digital games as tools for awareness-raising and activism.¹⁵

There are features of digital games that are different and unique, and the pervasiveness of the technology that enables individuals to access and engage with digital games has had a significant impact on the use of this technology by advocacy and humanitarian aid organisations. Digital games have been touted as more interactive and are also, sometimes, (problematically) framed as more impactful than watching a video or reading a story.¹⁶ There are certain features of digital games that offer opportunities for those trying to convey a message. Allowing the player to make choices and then demonstrating the consequences of those choices can be a powerful awareness-raising tool in some circumstances.¹⁷ However, as will be discussed below, the potential for complexity and nuance in storytelling through digital games has mixed success in games for awareness-raising purposes, just like most forms of humanitarian awareness-raising.

The Game Worlds of Human Trafficking

This section briefly introduces the three games explored in this article, before moving to analyse how narratives of trafficking are present in the following section.

¹² J Morrisette, ‘Glory to Arstotzka: Morality, rationality, and the iron cage of bureaucracy in Papers, Please’, *Game Studies*, vol. 17, issue 1, 2017.

¹³ I Bogost, S Ferrari and B Schweizer, *NewsGames: Journalism at play*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2010, pp. 11-13.

¹⁴ T Smethurst and S Craps, ‘Towards an Understanding of Drone Fiction’, *Journal of War and Culture Studies*, vol. 12, issue 1, 2019, pp. 85-102, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17526272.2018.1514759>.

¹⁵ It is important to note that not all these games were made as ‘activist’ tools, or by humanitarian or advocacy organisations. We mention them here to situate the growth of games designed explicitly as awareness-raising tools within the broader digital ecology.

¹⁶ See, for example: A R Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on algorithmic culture*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2006; M Eskelinen ‘The Gaming Situation’, *Game Studies*, vol. 1, issue 1, 2001.

¹⁷ G Sou, ‘Trivial Pursuits? Serious (video) games and the media representation of refugees’, *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 39, issue 3, 2018, pp. 510-526, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2017.1401923>.

The Balkans ACT Now! *BAN Human Trafficking* game¹⁸ was first released as an app and desktop game in 2014 with the financial support of the European Union, coordinated by the Serbian NGO ASTRA in partnership with several national anti-trafficking organisations from North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro as well as a partner in the Netherlands. The game gives players an option of selecting from six possible characters—Sarah, Kate, Anna, Cody, Aaron or Max. While the game can be played in nine different languages, the curiously anglicised character names remain the same, regardless of the language selected. There is no publicly available information on how many times the game has been played.

The 2017 browser-based game *(Un)Trafficked*¹⁹ was developed by Canadian-based studio FFunction for Indian Nobel Peace Prize recipient Kailash Satyarthi's Children's Foundation and the Children's Investment Fund Foundation. The user plays as Alisha, a 13-year-old Indian girl, who is taken from her village and, depending on the choices the game-player makes, is exploited either in a private home or in a brothel. Available in both English and Hindi, it is designed to raise awareness of child-trafficking as part of a larger national campaign. Reports indicate that the game has been played more than 100,000 times since its launch, with most players being based in India.²⁰

*Missing: Game for a Cause*²¹ is a mobile app created by Indian game studio Flying Robot Studios with artist and anti-trafficking activist Leena Kejriwal. The game was created in conjunction with Kejriwal's wider public art project; the website reports over half a million downloads 'worldwide' since the game's launch in 2016. Following the release of the prototype, the game designers raised more than USD 50,000 from 455 backers via the funding platform Kickstarter to produce a more extended version. A free preview of the extended version of the game allows the user to play as Champa, a girl from an Indian village. Our analysis is based on the prototype version of the game that is available as a free app. In this version of the game, which can be played at an 'easy' or 'hard' setting, very little background information is given about Champa. The game commences with her being held prisoner at a brothel.

¹⁸ Balkans ACT Now! *BAN Human Trafficking* game, <http://www.banhumantrafficking.com/en/play-the-game>.

¹⁹ *(Un)Trafficked* game, <http://www.bharatyatra.online/untrafficked>.

²⁰ M Thomas, 'What is it like to be a child trafficking victim in India? An online game will put you in her shoes', *Quartz India*, 17 November 2017, <https://qz.com/india/1131165/untrafficked-if-you-want-to-know-what-its-like-to-be-a-child-trafficking-victim-in-india-play-this-online-game>.

²¹ *Missing: Game for a Cause*, <https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/missing-game-for-cause/id1161113559>.

The stated intention behind all three games is to raise awareness of the problem of human trafficking, positioning these games as educative tools within a wider anti-trafficking movement. Information about the reach and impact of these games is extremely limited. With the exception of the report that the *(Un)Trafficked* game had been played more than 100,000 times, mostly by people in India, there is currently no publicly accessible data reporting on the players of the games, and no evaluation of their impact on the audience's awareness and understanding of human trafficking. Without further access to data about the players of these games, it is impossible to analyse audience reception and draw conclusions about how the games' narratives may have appealed to gamers' identities or resonated with their life experiences.²² Thus, we are limited in this paper to an analysis of how these games portray trafficking, how this compares with traditional approaches to awareness-raising, and how the interactive nature of the game may impact upon the storytelling.

The games utilise a choose-your-own-adventure style of storytelling, although the potential outcomes are limited, which raises questions about the way in which games are used. Anti-trafficking awareness-raising approaches utilising more traditional media have often been criticised for depicting trafficking as an individualised problem, with limited agency afforded to victims who are depicted in simplistic, infantilising ways,²³ adhering to conceptions of the 'ideal victim'.²⁴ We conducted a narrative analysis of these games, treating them as texts that have inherent meanings.²⁵ We experienced them as the audience would, using a desktop computer to play *(Un)Trafficked* and the Balkans ACT Now! game, and an iPad to play *Missing*, which was not available as a desktop game at the time. Each game was played several times while making notes to fully explore the different options and routes available to the player, and we reflected on the narratives and choices presented to us both collectively and individually to inform our analysis here.

²² A Shaw, 'Do you Identify as a Gamer? Gender, race, sexuality, and gamer identity', *New Media & Society*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2011, pp. 28-44, p. 29, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444811410394>.

²³ K Kempadoo, 'The Modern-Day White (Wo)Man's Burden: Trends in anti-trafficking and anti-slavery campaigns', *Journal of Human Trafficking*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2015, pp. 8-20, p. 12, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2015.1006120>.

²⁴ N Christie, 'The Ideal Victim' in E Fattah (ed.), *From Crime Policy to Victim Policy: Reorienting the justice system*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1986.

²⁵ See Keogh; E Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on ergodic literature*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1997. It is important to note that we consider games cultural texts that, just like television, film, literature and other forms of popular culture, generate cultural meaning and are a meaningful part of culture.

In the next section, we examine how the depiction of trafficking in these three games compares to the ideal victims and individualised narratives most common in traditional awareness-raising campaigns. We also question whether or not the medium of games provides an avenue through which to offer a more nuanced narrative.

Game-Based Storytelling: Reflecting or subverting stereotypes

The stories presented in online games do not purport to be real but rather present fictionalised or amalgamated narratives. Awareness-raising games like these are premised on the assumption that the stories *could* be real. They are not fantastical; they are representations of what the game-makers believe human trafficking to be. As such, they adhere to narrative conventions in the presentation of stories. They seek to make a story compelling by demonstrating some form of 'breach' with the everyday,²⁶ yet they also aim to give the story 'cultural resonance' with audiences²⁷ to enable them to sympathise with the victim and accept that the circumstances are not so impossible to believe. Human trafficking awareness campaigns commonly achieve elements of breach through the depiction of horrific aspects of physical abuse,²⁸ while resonating with an audience's understanding of victims as young, female and innocent.²⁹ In so doing, they represent the problem of trafficking in a particular way, drawing upon persistent, and limiting, stereotypes. In particular, trafficking awareness campaigns have been criticised for disseminating narratives that depict trafficking as a problem of criminal migration rather than structural inequality,³⁰ for denying the agency of victims,³¹ and for relying on notions of an 'ideal victim'. All of these problematic narratives are evident in the three games analysed here, though to varying degrees.

²⁶ M D Jones and M K McBeth, 'A Narrative Policy Framework: Clear enough to be wrong?', *Policy Studies Journal*, vol. 38, issue 2, 2010, pp. 329-353, p. 343, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1541-0072.2010.00364.x>.

²⁷ R D Benford and D A Snow, 'Framing Processes and Social Movements: An overview and assessment', *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 26, issue 1, 2000, pp. 611-639, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.26.1.611>.

²⁸ Andrijasevic and Mai.

²⁹ O'Brien, 2019.

³⁰ E Bernstein, 'Militarized Humanitarianism meets Carceral Feminism: The politics of sex, rights, and freedom in contemporary anti-trafficking campaigns', *Signs*, vol. 36, issue 1, 2010, pp. 45-71, p. 61, <https://doi.org/10.1086/652918>.

³¹ R Andrijasevic, 'Beautiful Dead Bodies: Gender, migration and representation in anti-trafficking campaigns', *Feminist Review*, vol. 86, issue 1, 2007, pp. 24-44, p. 41, <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.fr.9400355>.

Individualised Narratives

Digital games individualise the story. In all of the games, the player follows the story of an individual character and thus, human trafficking is represented in these games, as in much anti-trafficking awareness-raising, through an individual narrative, or a 'highly individualized cautionary tale'.³² However, these games also demonstrate that some attempts to convey the factors that impact on individuals' lives in the trafficking story are certainly better than others. While *Missing* and *(Un)Trafficked* fail to convey the intricacies of human trafficking, *BAN Human Trafficking* indicates that it is possible for games to communicate complexity.

The gameplay in all three games relies on predominantly binary choices, which are extremely limited and fail to capture the complexity of the larger factors that condition choices. Anti-trafficking awareness campaigns typically depict an individual victim in one moment in time, usually the point of their victimisation, obscuring the many factors in their lives that may have led them to this point. *Missing* provides no origin story at all for the victim Champa. Her story begins in a locked room, where she awakes from presumably being drugged, kidnapped and brought to the brothel. Her captor, brothel madam Masi, makes a vague reference to the fact that someone from her village must have helped the 'pimp' to kidnap and sell her, but this is all we will ever know. As noted earlier, the preview for the extended version indicates that more details about Champa's background are included; however, this is absent from the initially developed, free version of the game. While it is not unusual for a free preview game to require players to pay for more complexity, as an educative tool the free game effectively detaches from the story Champa's age, where she is from, her education level, her prospects for further education and employment, and her relationship with her family and local community.

(Un)Trafficked offers slightly more explanation of the circumstances in which Alisha comes to be victimised. Her father is offered the choice of sending her to the city with a strange man, or the ostensibly 'correct' choice of keeping her at home. The player is provided with an information box explaining that parents of children aged between six and fourteen years old are 'legally obliged to make sure they have access to an education', and that children over fourteen years of age can investigate 'skill-building programs'. However, the choice presented to Alisha's father oversimplifies the conundrum faced by parents struggling to provide an education and a future for their children. The binary choice whether to keep Alisha at home or not also subscribes to a frequent assumption of anti-trafficking

³² Sharapov and Mendel, p. 6.

policies that potential victims can be saved by keeping them at home.³³ Seeking opportunities elsewhere, especially for young women, is depicted as unacceptably dangerous without much consideration of whether or not the situation at home is any safer or better. This deflects attention from the task of ensuring that young women can travel, migrate, and pursue opportunities, while also remaining safe.

BAN Human Trafficking does a much better job of contextualising the victim's journey. This is partly because the game provides six narratives to choose from, rather than just one, thus adding greater complexity to the overall depiction of trafficking. In the individual narratives, the level of detail contained in each stand-alone story demonstrates that it is possible to depict greater complexity in the experiences of trafficked persons. Each of the six characters is offered several choices at the beginning of the game, showing them trying to seek out a safe path to further education, employment or migration. Unlike the other two games analysed, and most other anti-trafficking advocacy, their victimisation is not portrayed as a quirk of fate or individual criminal behaviour of villains. Instead, the game path demonstrates several reasons why young people may find themselves in a situation of forced labour or servitude. For instance, one character, Aaron, lives with a disability as a result of a car accident. He is not able to finish high school, and thus his work options are limited. Another character, Kate, is a 22-year-old medical graduate who wants to find a 'nursing position in Western Europe'.

Depicting human trafficking through individualised narratives, without providing enough detail about the many factors that contextualise victims' lives beyond their experience of exploitation, can result in the representation of trafficking as a problem to be solved through greater law and order.³⁴ This focus on the criminal aspects of trafficking, rather than the factors that lead to the exploitation, reinforces a law enforcement response, and fails to 'challenge structural and causal factors of inequality'.³⁵ However, *BAN Human Trafficking* demonstrates that it is possible to depict the causes of the problem as structural, even through individualised narratives, with the difficulties of migrating for work in the absence of reliable networks and appropriate financial support a central element in several of the stories.

³³ L M Agustin, *Sex at the Margins: Migration, labour markets and the rescue industry*, Zed Books, London, 2007.

³⁴ E Kinney, 'Victims, Villains, and Valiant Rescuers: Unpacking sociolegal constructions of human trafficking and crimmigration in popular culture' in Joao Guia (ed.), *The Illegal Business of Human Trafficking*, Springer, New York, 2015, p. 105.

³⁵ Andrijasevic and Mai.

Choices and Agency

In contrast to most anti-trafficking awareness-raising campaigns in which the victim is static and the story complete, games offer an element of real-time choice and the demonstration of agency. The choices belong to the game-player, but this storytelling technique clearly conveys messages about the degree of agency trafficked persons possess. Anti-trafficking awareness-raising campaigns frequently depict victims as helpless, passive actors,³⁶ lacking in the ability or initiative to avoid, resist or escape their exploitation. The three games analysed for this research reinforce the helplessness of victims to a certain extent. But while *Missing* and *(Un)Trafficked* afford no or very little agency to the victim, *BAN Human Trafficking* depicts characters who maintain an element of agency throughout the entire narrative arc.

In *(Un)Trafficked*, none of the choices belong to the victim, starting from the moment at which the game-player is offered the option to ‘customise’ their trafficking victim by choosing a name and hometown for her, in the same way that a player might choose an avatar’s clothes and hair. This sets the tone for a game in which Alisha has no agency and is simply moved through the game as a token on which others act. The game-player makes all the choices, but these are never Alisha’s choices. They are decisions taken by the other characters in the game, including her father, her friends, an employment agent, a sex work customer, the wife of an employer, or a police officer.

The lack of choices or agency granted to Alisha may be an intentional design decision to emphasise the powerlessness of her situation. Her helplessness, and the inevitability of her exploitation, are further emphasised through the use of a common digital game aesthetic—a ‘hearts bar’ positioned at the top of the screen, just as other games might depict the ‘health’ or ‘lives’ of an avatar. In *(Un)Trafficked*, when a character makes a bad decision, for example a policeman refusing to help, an animation shows two hearts break and then fall away, accompanied by the sound of a small sob, assumed to be from Alisha. This sob is the only voice Alisha is granted in the game, demonstrating that Alisha is a victim not only of exploitation, but of a life in which none of the choices were ever hers.

In *Missing*, and *BAN Human Trafficking*, all of the choices belong to the victims. While *(Un)Trafficked* may instead have been attempting to convey a message about the roles and responsibilities of other actors, the games in which the story

³⁶ R Andrijasevic, ‘The Figure of the Trafficked Victim: Gender, rights and representation’ in M Evans *et al.* (eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Feminist Theory*, SAGE Publications Ltd., New York, 2014, pp. 359-373.

revolves around the choices of the victim is a positive departure from one which gives no choices and no voice to a child victim. However, the degree of choice and agency afforded to the victims differs significantly between *Missing* and *BAN Human Trafficking*.

In *Missing*, the player is offered different types of choices—textual and physical. The text choices give Champa binary options, for instance, whether she will or will not help another girl in the brothel. The physical choices enable the game-player to move Champa, though these choices are tightly constrained by the field of play. For example, in one scenario, Champa is offered the opportunity to escape, and she can choose to run down one corridor or another. This choice, while affording some agency to the victim, still relies on an individualising narrative in which her imprisonment is a personal problem to be solved. The educative purpose behind the depiction of this type of choice is questionable, as the choice of a particular corridor conveys nothing about the possible solutions to the problem of trafficking.

In *BAN Human Trafficking*, the choices are presented as individual, with characters shown to have agency and initiative. They are presented with choices that include conducting due diligence, or exhausting all alternatives, before making decisions that may place them in greater danger of exploitation, such as taking a day to think about a job offer, and doing some research on the labour hire company before accepting the offer. Some of the circumstances depicted do highlight the relative helplessness of victims. However, instead of depicting helplessness as the result of a physical inability to escape (as in the case of *Missing*), this is shown as being more directly connected to wider structural conditions outside of the victim's control. For example, in Kate's story, she is able to escape from a situation of domestic servitude, but the police do not recognise her as a victim. The game reports: 'They treat you like a criminal at the police station because you're a foreigner without a work permit. They soon deport you to your country'. These limitations on the agency of victims are depicted as occurring in spite of the personal strength and initiative of victims. The characterisation of trafficked persons as rendered helpless not by their own personal characteristics but by either inaction or 'crimmigration'³⁷ by law enforcement agencies serves as an important counter-narrative to much anti-trafficking awareness-raising that fails to convey this complexity. As compared to posters, leaflets or even short stories on webpages, the longer form narrative provided by the game may be an important element in enabling the inclusion of villainous characters beyond the initial 'trafficker', and demonstrating how government agencies also contribute to the victimisation of migrants.

³⁷ J M Chacon, 'Tensions and Trade-Offs: Protecting trafficking victims in the era of immigration enforcement', *University of Pennsylvania Law Review*, vol. 158, issue. 6, 2010, pp. 1609-1653.

Ideal Victims

The 'ideal victim'³⁸ is a persistent feature of anti-trafficking awareness campaigns,³⁹ which have been heavily criticised for perpetuating the expectation that victims should be young, female, innocent and passive.⁴⁰ While all three games rely on some elements of ideal victimhood, *BAN Human Trafficking* again does a better job at diversifying the central figure of the trafficked person beyond young, female and weak.

Both *Missing* and *(Un)Trafficked* rely on the stereotypical image of the trafficked person as young, female and virginal. In *(Un)Trafficked*, Alisha is described as a teenage girl, while in *Missing*, we are not told Champa's age, though she is visually depicted as young. The innocence of these girls is emphasised through their youth, but also through indications of their virginity.⁴¹ This is explicitly declared in the case of *Missing*. In the first chapter of the game, ominously titled 'Chapter One: Death of Innocence', Champa is told by the brothel madam Masi that she is going to 'take her purity from her', before leaving her in a locked room with a male character, Shonty. As Masi closes the door and Shonty advances on Champa, the screen fades to black. Champa reappears in the aftermath of her presumed rape, having now 'lost her innocence'. The sexual abuse of Champa is always implied, rather than explicitly shown. Later in the game when Champa is forced to sell sexual services to customers, the rapes are signified with Champa and the customer entering a room, closing a door, and a screen fading to black.

There are some differences in the depictions of Alisha and Champa. Alisha is shown as completely passive in her victimisation, during which the abuses she suffers are primarily instigated by an adult stranger with criminal intent. In some contrast, Champa is depicted as making a decision to 'allow' her sexual abuses, in order to earn an opportunity to escape. As noted earlier, an element of the game involves the player, as Champa, attempting to secure money by offering sexual services to customers. If her 'bid' is too high, the customer will walk away, placing the player (and thus Champa) in the situation of working to actively

³⁸ Christie.

³⁹ E O'Brien, 'Ideal Victims in Human Trafficking Awareness Campaigns' in K Carrington *et al.* (eds.), *Crime, Justice and Social Democracy: International perspectives*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2013.

⁴⁰ J O'Connell Davidson, 'Will the Real Sex Slave Please Stand up?', *Feminist Review*, no. 83, 2006, pp. 4-22, <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.fr.9400278>. See also: C Hoyle *et al.*, 'Labelling the Victims of Sex Trafficking: Exploring the borderland between rhetoric and reality', *Social and Legal Studies*, vol. 20, no. 3, 2011, pp. 313-329, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0964663911405394>.

⁴¹ Kinney, p. 97.

secure a customer. The depictions of both Alisha and Champa rely on very familiar tropes of victimhood. In addition to the youth of victims and the innocence inferred through virginity, victims are also expected to demonstrate some elements of resistance to their abuse, to reinforce their status as ideal victims.⁴² The games offer a slight twist on this depiction. Where Alisha is shown as completely incapable of offering resistance, assumedly by virtue of her age and gender, Champa is shown as resisting her initial assault, but then resigned to her fate for long enough to enable her escape. In relying on common tropes, these depictions offer little by way of reflection on structural forces that leave girls in positions of vulnerability and precarity, and undermine their agency.

The fact that two of the three games focus exclusively on trafficking for sexual exploitation and sexual abuse is consistent with the heavy focus on this form of trafficking in awareness-raising efforts.⁴³ *BAN Human Trafficking* demonstrates some similarities with this depiction of victims in its characterisation of Anna, a victim of trafficking into the sex industry. This character appears to be slightly more sexualised than the others, with the cartoon drawing depicting Anna as voluptuous, blue-eyed and blonde. She is described as 18 years old, and her story leads to a point where she is depicted as continuing to 'service' clients in an attempt to work off a debt. Both Champa and Alisha are also depicted as providing sexual services without repeated performances of resistance. But where Anna and Alisha's experiences are both contextualised through the refusal of police officers to assist them, serving some educative purpose, Champa's victimisation is turned into a measure of success in the game. The more men she 'seduces', the more successful the player, and the more opportunities they create to ultimately win the game by escaping.

Beyond Anna's story, however, *BAN Human Trafficking* offers a much broader narrative about trafficked persons, partly through the diversity reflected in the six characters depicted, but also through a greater contextualisation of the characters' backgrounds and choices. There are three male and three female characters, though notably all victims are young adults aged between 18 and 22 years old. The stories also offer some diversification on the 'ideal victim' trope by explaining different factors that have rendered the central protagonists vulnerable to exploitation. For example, Max is described as vulnerable partly due to an unstable family life, while Cody is depicted as vulnerable due to his status as an irregular migrant. Therefore, the Balkans ACT Now! game subverts the message most often

⁴² O'Brien, 2019, p. 63.

⁴³ O'Brien, 2013, p. 318.

communicated by awareness campaigns that in order to be ‘worthy of pity’⁴⁴ victims must be easily recognisable to the audience and thus meet the stereotypical notion of the ideal victim.

Games such as *Missing*, *(Un)Trafficked*, and *BAN Human Trafficking* also individualise both the problem and the solution. As Knowlton notes in relation to a game about the genocide in Darfur, the switch from depicting horrifying events to a positive call to action signals that the player’s role in the game can affect change.⁴⁵ It ‘renders the Darfuris the passive instrument of, in this instance, Western teenage agency’.⁴⁶ While *BAN Human Trafficking* offers more complex narratives about victimisation and highlights the potential for games to express more complex framings of victims’ experiences, the games analysed here often reproduce the same limited understandings of victims, with trafficking represented as an individual problem, to be solved by an individual’s intervention.

The End Game: Education versus recreation

Games as awareness-raising tools walk a fine line between education and recreation. The social impact of a given game may depend on the extent to which the player is able to recognise the game as an awareness-raising tool, rather than simply a recreational activity. In the three cases examined for this research, the games achieve this to different degrees. *(Un)Trafficked* and *BAN Human Trafficking* have limited recreational elements. While they employ a familiar game-based structure through the ‘choose your own adventure’ style, and present cartoon graphics that offer a more playful rendering of the characters than is likely to be found in awareness campaign posters and reports, they are clearly recognisable as educative tools. Their main aim is very obviously to depict a version of the trafficking story, where the only outcome for the player is learning about the problem.

Missing is a jarring contrast to this. In this game, while the stated aim is to illustrate the complexities of human trafficking and how the problem might be prevented, the way in which the story has been gamified undercuts the message being shared.

⁴⁴ C Aradau, ‘The Perverse Politics of Four-Letter Words: Risk and pity in the securitisation of human trafficking’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, vol. 33, issue 2, 2004, p. 260, <https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298040330020101>.

⁴⁵ A Knowlton, ‘Darfur is Dying: A narrative analysis’, Masters Thesis, School of Communication, University of Nebraska at Omaha, 2009.

⁴⁶ J Auchter, ‘Playing War and Genocide: *Endgame: Syria and Darfur is Dying*’ in L J Shepherd and C Hamilton (eds.), *Understanding Popular Culture and World Politics in the Digital Age*, Routledge, New York, 2016.

The aim of *Missing* is to earn items such as keys and money, and 'win' the game by escaping, presenting itself as a much more conventional single-player quest game. At the resolution of the story, Champa is saved by a man from her hometown, with the player controlling the hero 'Shakti' rather than Champa, as he fights her traffickers in a dramatic scene on top of a train. The transfer of the game-player's control from Champa to Shakti is yet another indication of the lack of agency afforded to the victim in the narrative. Ultimately, the game offers a win for the player, not the victim. Rather than using a game-based platform to convey the complexity of life for trafficked persons, this game instead uses a shallow depiction of trafficking for sexual exploitation in order to provide a narrative for a game.

The resolutions to all three games present an unexpected element of the narrative, eschewing the common trope of characterising the hero as a Western saviour. In *Missing*, Champa is saved by a man from her hometown. In *BAN Human Trafficking*, several of the victims are shown returning home as a result of intervention from law enforcement, but not triumphantly. Rather, they are depicted as somewhat damaged by their experiences. Nevertheless, this depiction of the aftermath of a trafficking experience is rare in awareness-raising materials,⁴⁷ and presents an important element of the story through the depiction of the rehabilitation of victims and their efforts to seek justice.

In *(Un)Trafficked*, Alisha is never rescued. This conclusion to the story is in contrast to much anti-trafficking activism, which puts Westerners in the roles of heroes, raiding brothels to rescue victims from traffickers.⁴⁸ The medium of the digital game transports players into the role of virtual saviours, as their actions will guide the journey for the victim. While this might suggest a Western saviour, it is important to note that the audience for these games is not always from the Global North. Whether the player is from India, the Balkans, or a country far removed from the location of the narrative, players are nevertheless granted power over the narrative, functioning as virtual saviours in the hope that they will transition from screen action hero to real life activist.

We have focused here on the narratives and storytelling used by digital games that are designed to raise awareness about human trafficking. In focusing on the narratives, we have made visible the ways in which these games reproduce already-

⁴⁷ D Brennan and S Plambeck, 'Editorial: Moving forward—Life after trafficking', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 10, 2018, pp. 1-12, <https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201218101>.

⁴⁸ G Soderlund, 'Running from the Rescuers: New U.S. crusades against sex trafficking and the rhetoric of abolition', *NWSA Journal*, vol. 17, issue 3, 2005, pp. 64-87, <https://doi.org/10.1353/nwsa.2005.0071>.

dominant and problematic framings of victims, heroes and villains in trafficking stories. This exploration has not considered the audience explicitly; in part, this is due to a problematic lack of available information about who the audience of these games are, where geographically they are located, and what they do with the information gained from these games. We would argue that critical evaluation of these games (and others like them)—like many efforts in the humanitarian and advocacy fields⁴⁹—could be more embedded and publicly accessible to be able to evaluate the impact of such efforts.

This article has highlighted that, as with many awareness-raising efforts in other mediums, games about the experience of trafficking often reproduce limited narratives that rely on damaging stereotypes about victims as well as solutions to the problems presented. *(Un)Trafficked* and *Missing* rely heavily on these tropes, presenting individualised narratives that overlook more structural causes of the problem, present ideal victims, and deny victims any agency. In contrast, *BAN Human Trafficking* diversifies and complicates the trafficking narrative. These differing approaches to using digital games as tools for awareness-raising demonstrate the pitfalls of repeating the same narratives in different mediums, while also showing the potential of digital games to offer spaces for more complex stories to be told about the causes and consequences of human trafficking.

Games blur the lines between recreation and awareness-raising. This may assist anti-trafficking groups in communicating their messages to younger audiences,⁵⁰ though it also has the potential to evolve into the use of games for training purposes. If educative games about human trafficking remain beholden to the same storytelling conventions that plague more traditional forms of media used in awareness-raising, limited narratives will persist. The only point of difference, therefore, will be the problematic positioning of the audience within the narrative, playing the virtual saviour, rather than a more fundamental understanding of the lives and experiences of trafficked persons. Games may offer some avenue through which to diversify the narrative, but in their storytelling they must afford more agency to their protagonists and serve to subvert the audience's expectations.

⁴⁹ J Chapman and A Wameyo, *Monitoring and Evaluating Advocacy: A scoping study*, ActionAid, 2001; J H Marshall and D Suarez, 'The Flow of Management Practices: An analysis of NGO monitoring and evaluation dynamics', *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, vol. 43, issue 6, 2013, pp. 1033–1051, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0899764013494117>.

⁵⁰ Y Hashamova, *Screening Trafficking: Prudent or perilous*, Central European University Press, Budapest, 2018, pp. 116–117.

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